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Choosing schools, choosing selves: exploring the influence of parental identity and biography on the school choice process in Delhi, India

Drawing on qualitative interview data from a group of lower income parents in Delhi, India, this paper focuses on the dynamic relationship between parental choice of a particular school and parents' own identity construction. The data indicate that choice of school is for some parents a symbolic expression of identity, influenced by family dynamics and parents' educational biographies. The paper outlines the concept of 'forging solidarities' and proposes it as an alternative way of understanding school enrolment decisions that recognizes the social significance of such choices for the wider family unit. More generally, as school choice mechanisms in various forms become an increasingly important part of the educational landscape in many countries, the findings draw attention to the socio-cultural nature of choice in real-world market settings and the contribution of schooling choices to processes of social and educational segregation.

Keywords: school choice; India; parental identity; low fee private schools

Introduction

In India, as in many countries around the world, the contemporary education landscape is increasingly conceptualised as a market space. Drawing upon economic theories concerned with market functionality, policy discourse since the 1990s has championed market-based reforms to education ostensibly in the name of improved quality and social equity. This has included a particular focus on increasing the number and type of providers within schooling markets and the fostering of parental 'choice' on the basis of the assumption that rational choice-making operates in such settings.

In brief, rational choice models within the school choice literature hypothesize that parents are 'utility maximisers' who make decisions on the basis of clear value preferences within identifiable household constraints, weighing up the relative costs and benefits of particular choice sets (Bosetti, 2004). Whilst some commentators argue that competition between schools leads to better quality services and lower costs, as competing suppliers vie for potential clients (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Tooley, 2000), a number of empirical studies investigating choice-led and pro-privatisation policies have found that those from more privileged backgrounds are better able to access and deploy the sorts of material, social and

cultural resources that are needed to take advantage of choice policies, leading to the marginalisation of less desirable schools and the pupils who attend them (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Crozier & Davies, 2006). In addition, empirically grounded accounts of meaning-making regarding schooling decisions have contributed to our understanding of choice in real world contexts by identifying how parents negotiate race and class dynamics within school choice processes (Reay, Crozier & James, 2011; Saporito & Laureau, 1999; Gewirtz et al., 1995), as well as illuminating the intersections between choice-making and the symbolic enactment of social identity (Lund, 2015; Cucchiara & Horvath, 2014).

The existing school choice literature has focused largely on economically developed country contexts, such as the UK, USA and Australia (see Gewirtz et al., 1995; Bosetti, 2004; Campell, Proctor & Sherington, 2009), resulting in a substantial evidence gap concerning the implications of pro-privatisation education policies for countries within the Global South. The growing body of empirical research in India focused on the country's private schooling sector has illuminated a number of constraints to private school access including on the basis of gender (De, Khera, Samson & Kumar, 2011; Azam & Kingdon, 2013), economic status (Härmä, 2011), and caste (Woodhead, Frost & James, 2013; Bhattacharya, Dasgupta, Mandal & Mukherjee, 2015). However, to date very little research has looked in detail at the processes driving the growth of the private sector by focusing on the dynamics of education decision making within households, or has explored how households are navigating this rapidly shifting education landscape within a local market context. Notable contributions to the literature are Srivastava (2008), who explores school choice amongst households accessing two low fee private schools in Uttar Pradesh, and James & Woodhead (2014), who focus on the decision-making processes of frequent school movers within a broader scale, longitudinal study into children's lives in Andhra Pradesh. Nevertheless, questions of social identity and the role of parental biographies within schooling decisions are significant gaps

within the wider literature concerning low fee private schooling and school choice more generally. In particular, the intersections between schooling decisions and parental identity construction, and the extent to which this may help to inform our understanding of the drivers behind increasing private school enrolment, remain under researched.

Building upon previous work concerning low fee private schooling and school choice in India this paper seeks to help to fill this gap. In particular, the paper focuses on the social meanings that parents attach to the act of choosing a school for their children and the ways in which choice of school may become, for some parents, a symbolic means of expressing and enacting a particular identity. This is shown to operate across multiple dimensions, for example meaning-making concerning parenthood, as well as in relation to wider community solidarities and dynamics between groups; namely, choosing on the basis of affiliation with ‘people like us’ or indeed the reverse, choosing to avoid ‘people *not* like us’.

Whilst this study focuses on a specific education setting and group of households in India, the findings have relevance to other studies of school choice by drawing attention to the influence of parental identity and biography on schooling decisions, a little explored area within the literature. In contrast to an abstract market theory model, it is argued that a more nuanced framework incorporating the lived realities of education markets in local settings may be a more helpful way of illuminating parental motivation and decision making processes concerning schooling, contributing in turn to a more developed understanding the impact of the increased marketisation of education for social equity.

Theoretical framework

School choice policies and their proponents in the UK, USA and elsewhere tend to draw upon rational choice theory propounded by Freidman (1962) and others to frame how parents approach school selection. In brief, this model presents parents as making choices using

well-defined choice sets, gathering information and weighing up the various options in relation to fixed preferences and constraints, such as the household budget, with the goal of selecting the ‘best’ school for their child (Chubb & Moe, 1990). However, as noted by Cucchiara & Horvat (2014), a key criticism of rational choice theory is that it fails to take adequate account of the socio-cultural nature of choice-making, including how class, gender and race dynamics may influence choice processes.

A growing body of sociological empirical research has problematized the application of rational choice theory to education, illuminating how the lived experience of choice making in real world settings is imbued with meanings, contradictions and competing objectives that do not fit within the strict confines of economic rationality. Gewirtz et al.’s (1995) well known study of school choice in the UK, for example, draws attention to the role of social class within choice processes, showing that choice tends to have different meanings within different class contexts and that families of different social classes tend to engage in the choice process differently. In addition, a number of other research studies point to the role of race and political ideologies in shaping schooling decisions. For example, in their investigation of intra-district student transfers in the US, Saporito & Lareau (1999) found that white families tend to avoid schools with large numbers of black students irrespective of quantitative measures of school quality such as examination results: ‘white applicants’ choices were powerfully and negatively linked to the presence of black students’ (p. 427). Empirical research in India has also illuminated the impact on school enrolment from the interplay between gender, poverty level, locality and caste (Woodhead et al., 2013; Bhattacharya et al., 2015).

Whilst much of the existing research on school choice within many countries has focused almost exclusively on the ‘objective’ factors parents may consider when selecting a school, such as distance and affordability, recent research has identified that parental

biographies and identity characteristics also have a role to play in shaping schooling decisions. For example, in their ethnographic study of school choice-making by middle-class parents considering a diverse neighbourhood public school in the US, Cucchiara & Horvat (2014) explain how the act of choosing a school may become a means for parents to construct and to enact a particular identity, in this case that of ‘liberal open-minded city dwellers’ (p. 487). The influence of identity construction within educational decision making processes is also explored by Lund (2015), who points to the significance of symbolic boundaries and group solidarities with respect to students’ academic pathways and schooling decisions in Sweden.

Despite such empirical insights, the issue of social identity is often lost in public debates and policy discourse concerning school choice, including what role the dynamic between identity and school selection may play in reinforcing and reproducing segregated patterns of school enrolment. By adding to the small but growing literature in this area this paper seeks to redress this imbalance by considering the social meanings behind schooling decisions and the dynamic relationship between parents’ self-identities and choice of school for their children.

Adopting a similar approach to Cucchiara & Horvat (2014), this paper draws upon insights from interpretivist research on consumption in order to illuminate the connections between consumer choices and identity, and support an in-depth examination of the social meanings that schooling choices may convey. Insights from this literature include the understanding of identity as malleable and multifaceted, varying between contexts and subject to processes of negotiation and transformation (Lamont & Molnár, 2001). As Giddens (1991) explains, everyday lifestyle choices may be understood to embody individual narratives of self-identity, with consumption practices an inherent part of the ongoing project of self-identity construction and revision:

Each of the small decisions a person makes every day – what to wear, what to eat, how to conduct himself at work, who to meet with later in the evening – contribute to such routines. All such choices (as well as larger and more consequential ones) are decisions not only about how to act but who to be.

(p. 80)

In this way, the choice of particular material or cultural consumption objects may be understood as closely intertwined with individuals' own conceptions of their lives and the images that they may wish to project: 'objects are consumed not only for what they do but also for what they communicate to oneself and one's surroundings' (Therkelsen & Gram, 2008, p. 270). Such self-identity projects may entail the conscious, public demonstration of wealth, prestige and power, which Veblen (1899/2009) conceptualises as 'conspicuous consumption', as well as through other practices that lend material value to intra and inter group expressions of belonging or disassociation. In particular, the concept of 'brand community', coined by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) and designating the community formed on the basis of attachment to a particular product or brand, is useful in drawing a connection between the choice of a particular product and individual identity, culture and social relationships: 'Consuming a specific brand and associated brand image allows consumers to create, transform, and express their self-identity' (Ekinici, Sirakaya-Turk & Preciado, 2013). Further, 'brand community' is suggestive of the symbolic boundaries and solidarities that certain consumer choices may convey: 'goods are neutral, their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges' (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979, p. 12). Given that goods may represent both connections with and barriers to other consumers within the social milieu, it is necessary to situate an analysis of consumption within the relevant socio-cultural contexts in order to understand better the social meanings that particular acts of consumption may imply.

In addition, the role that emotions can play in shaping decision making processes, either consciously or unconsciously, has been well documented by researchers from across a

range of disciplines. However, the sociological consumption research literature is useful in illuminating the intersections between emotion and identity construction within market settings. Malone (2012), for example, identifies pride as influencing consumer decision making with regard to ethical tourism, whilst Jyrinki's (2011) explains how pet-related consumption provides owners with ways to construct their identity through emotional attachment. Whilst these examples are very different from school choice-making, they are useful in illustrating some of the emotions behind particular consumption practices and processes of identity construction. Given that schooling choices are an important household decision that concern children's lives and future trajectories, attention to the role of emotions within such choice processes is especially appropriate.

In summary, we may understand consumer choice-making as emotionally laden, with consumer practices carrying social meanings that are both inward and outward facing (Ekinci et al., 2013). Further, the focus on social meanings within sociological consumption research supports an approach that examines the nature of choice-making within local market settings. In an education system where consumer behaviours are encouraged and indeed increasingly necessitated, approaching school choice making as an act of consumption offers an alternative lens for exploring the significance of particular choices and the resultant school enrolment patterns.

The contemporary education landscape in India

In India, the education landscape has undergone considerable change in recent decades. Driven by the goal of providing universal access to basic education for all, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Government of India's flagship primary education programme, has contributed to the influx of children entering primary schooling in the country (UNICEF, 2014). At the same time, there has been a similarly dramatic increase in the number of 'low

fee' private (LFP) schools, the growth of which has been largely outside formal government policy intervention or regulation. Whilst there is a lack of conceptual clarity as to what constitutes 'low fee' schooling (Day Ashley et al., 2014), the available empirical evidence suggests that an apparently increasing proportion of children from households traditionally only able to access government schooling are attending private schools. Indeed, in the context of near universal access to government elementary education, the 'mushrooming' of private sector institutions and the migration of students away from the state to the non-state sector is striking, with 30% of children in rural areas reported as enrolled at private schools (Pratham, 2014). Smaller scale studies suggest that private enrolment is likely greater in urban centres, with one study based in Hyderabad identifying that private enrolment was as high as 65% in some low income areas of the city (Tooley, Dixon & Gomathi, 2007).

Whilst some commentators have welcomed the growth of private provision within the schooling sector, serious concerns have been raised about the potentially harmful consequences of private sector growth for social equity including increased social segregation. For example, Bhattacharya et al. (2015) found that comparatively higher status households within their data set were more likely to send their children to private school, a finding that supports concerns that private sector growth reflects middle class and elite flight from the government sector: 'Today, state schools are largely dominated by children from the poor, belonging mainly to 'lower' castes and minorities' (Nambissan, 2010, p. 287). In addition, the quality of low fee schooling has been called into question with a number of studies identifying little, if any, 'value-added' from private institutions in the form of test score outcomes once the socio-economic background of pupils has been controlled for (Goyal & Pandey, 2009; Chudgar & Quin, 2012; Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2013).

Despite the mixed evidence base in terms of quality and access, enhancing parental choice in the name of both quality improvement and social equity has emerged as a

discernible policy trend at the national level. As a specific policy mechanism for increasing parental choice, Clause 12(c) of the 2009 Right to Education Act (RTE Act) compels all private unaided schools to reserve 25% of their places in Class I (or pre-school, if available) for free for all children from economically and socially disadvantaged groups until they reach the end of elementary school.ⁱ At the same time, there is a growing trend towards public-private partnerships (PPPs) in education (Srivastava, 2010; Fennell, 2007), with PPPs framed within policy discourse as a means of fostering a ‘clear customer focus’ (Planning Commission, 2004, p. 5).

In line with the casting of parents and citizens within policy discourse as ‘customers’, the framing of choice as necessary within the contemporary education market in India is made explicit by Verger & VanderKaaij (2012), who point toward a widespread disillusionment with government schooling within public discourse: ‘in India, an open *discourse on the low quality of education in government institutions prevails amongst the public* [...] those who *have* a choice opt for non-government schools [emphasis in original]’ (p. 250-251). Indeed, Srivastava (2008) characterises parents who have chosen to send their children to private schools as ‘active choosers’, who gather market information from a range of sources in order to evaluate their schooling options. However, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the choice processes of parents who do not access the private sector, a gap which this paper seeks in part to address.

Methods and data

This paper draws upon data collected for the author’s doctoral study into parental school choice processes amongst lower income households in Delhi, India, between September 2014 and March 2015. Data presented here are from 58 semi-structured interviews with parents (or another close relative where appropriate) from across three slum squatter sites (Jhuggi

Jhopri (JJ) Clusters).ⁱⁱ Interviews took place at interviewees' homes or within the local area at a place of the interviewee's choosing, and lasted an average of 45 minutes. The majority of interviews were conducted in Hindi,ⁱⁱⁱ with the support of research assistants, who also assisted with the interview transcription and translation.

The two main case study sites (Locations A and B) were selected on the basis of the predominance of low income families residing in the area, as well as the range of schools and school types within the immediate vicinity (c. 500m). This included government schools managed by the relevant Municipal City District (MCD) and the Delhi Directorate of Education, private-aided schools,^{iv} and a range of private schooling options that varied by cost and recognition status. Schools were also found to be differentiated further within categories by medium of instruction, coeducational versus single sex status, and religious affiliation.

In addition, a small number of interviews were conducted with parents in a third JJ Cluster site (Location C) in a second district of the city in order to help to capture a wider range of market conditions and household characteristics. In particular, in addition to there being a range of government and private schools in the area, Location C was known to have a higher proportion of Muslim households, whose experiences in accessing schooling are known to be influenced by their religious status (Sachar Committee Report, 2007; Sarangapani & Winch, 2010).

(Table 1)

Parents/caregivers of children of elementary school age (age 6-14), or with children currently accessing elementary schooling, were eligible to take part in the study. Parents were asked about the factors they considered when deciding which school(s) their child or children would attend, what information sources they drew upon when making their decision and how decisions were made within the family unit. Parents were also asked more generally about

their views regarding the purpose of education and schooling, and their perceptions of different local market providers.

In line with an overall progressive and iterative approach to data analysis (Strauss, 1987), data have been subject to repeat processes of coding, developed, revisited and refined through an inductive process. At an early stage, ‘identity’ (intersecting with motherhood, parenthood, social status, experiences of schooling, emotion, and community) was recognized as a frequently recurring code within the parental interview data and it is from the data set relating to this theme that the findings presented in this paper are drawn.

Findings

In order to illustrate the role that parental identity played within choice processes, the remainder of this paper examines the intersections between parental identity and schooling choices. This comprises a consideration of the private and more intimate dimensions of identity (relating to conceptions of parenthood and motherhood) as well as the broader socio-cultural aspects of choice-making (relating to social status, regional identity and religion). The latter includes the efforts that parents make both to differentiate between and to forge solidarities with other households along various social identity constructs through schooling choices, illuminating in turn the ways in which different aspects of social identity are transformed into consumer choices within the education market.

Parenthood, motherhood and school choice

In an education market where choice may be conceptualised not as a one-time event, but as an ongoing process of reaffirmation in the sense of continuing to pay fees or to ensure a child’s attendance, understanding why parents place value on schooling and education is significant to a developed interpretation of the particular schooling choices that they make.

In India, whilst the RTE Act maintains that parents have a responsibility to ensure that their children receive an education, the absence of any legal enforcement for parents to enrol their children in school also affords the decision to do so particular significance.

For some parents, the act of choosing a school was imbued with their construction of what it meant to be a ‘good’ parent, with schooling functioning as a social indicator of parental care; in turn, selecting the ‘right’ sort of schooling was often tied to their own personal biographies. For Garima,^v her love marriage to a man of a lower caste and her subsequent estrangement from her own family had informed her perspective on her son’s education and the choice of a more expensive private school than was typical of other households within the community. In this extract, Garima connects her choice of private schooling for her son with the ‘social drop’ she experienced as a result of her marriage, illuminating her perception of the social value of education and the entanglement of choice-making with personal biography, class and caste:

I was interested in his education from the beginning. I wanted everything for him even things which I did not have. I had a love marriage, but I want my son to take my name forward. Everyone should think of me when they speak of my son. If he does something good in life, then he will be keeping my name.

(Garima, mother of one son (age 8); private school)^{vi}

For some parents, the social value of schooling was also apparent in their concern for how they were perceived as parents, as made explicit by one mother within the following extract:

I don’t want them [my daughters] to take up jobs. We are going to get them married after 3 to 4 years. In their marital house, they may do whatever they want. I am getting them educated so that no one says that their parents did not even send them to school.

(Adena, mother of six children (age 6-15); government schools)

This attentiveness to social perceptions of the household unit illustrates the significance of schooling decisions beyond the typical benefits associated with education for an individual

child. In particular, the association between schooling and being a ‘good’, caring parent was a sentiment that was expressed in different forms by most parents who were interviewed and suggests the significance of children’s education and schooling to parents’ own identity construction projects.

The relationship between children’s schooling and parents’ identity constructions was found to be significant in other ways, including in relation to maternal identity. Indeed, the mother as the key decision maker within the family was found to be a common pattern amongst families and, for some mothers, it was apparent that schooling decisions constituted a space for asserting a form of private empowerment within the domestic sphere (Connell, 1987). In the following extract, for example, Minakshi draws upon traditional images of motherhood in the form of pregnancy and ‘caring’ to assert her decision making authority and to support her ‘rights’ within her home over her child and his schooling:

[RA: who made the decision about which school your son would go to?]

Me, I decided. Carrying a child is my area. I carried my child, so I have more right over my child than my husband. Only a mother can care about a child like this, so women should take the decision [about schooling]

(Minakshi, mother of one son (age 5); private school)

Another mother, Sanjana, also emphasized how her paid work outside of the home increased her decision making power over domestic arrangements, in this case schooling decisions:

My husband wanted to send him [her son] to a government school, but I refused. I said I know another child in this area who is going to a private school. I see him going to the private school and he is doing well, so I decided that he [her son] should go to a private school. I said ‘I earn money as well I can also decide’.

(Sanjana, mother of one son (age 7); private school)

Whilst not all of the mothers interviewed were as explicit as Minakshi and Sanjana in asserting their maternal authority, the findings as a whole echo empirical research in other

contexts which has shown that it is very often mothers who take on the day-to-day activities regarding their children's schooling (see Reay, 1998; Cooper, 2009). This suggests that research concerning contemporary constructions of motherhood and women's empowerment more generally in India should include children's education as a particular subject of concern, at present a little explored area within the literature. In addition, Sanjana's affirmation of her earning power and direct rebuttal of her husband's choice of school reveals a key facet of the emotional processes underlying schooling decision making, in this case Sanjana's obvious pride in her ability to pay for her son's private education. However, as outlined in the following section, the research findings also suggest that for many parents, including Sanjana, choice-making involved a complex interplay of emotions, often driven by parents' own experiences of schooling, or lack thereof, that served to shape their identity as consumers within the education market.

Parents' educational biographies

In view of the ways in which identity is negotiated through personal experience and interactions with social institutions (Giddens, 1991), this section presents data that illuminates how past personal experiences informed parents' values concerning education and schooling, and in turn their identity within the education market.

Parents' own experiences of education, the majority of which was found to be extremely limited, particularly for mothers, were found to influence decision making concerning children's schooling in a number of ways. For Sanjana, as for many other parents, her self-identification as uneducated was a key driver behind her engagement with her son's schooling and the substantial financial sacrifice she made in order to send him to a private school, which, as she had already described earlier in the interview, was a decision made ostensibly against the wishes of her husband:

Myself, I am not educated. This is why I am forced to work as a sweeper in the bungalows. But I don't want this for my children. I want them to work in offices and do government jobs, so education is very important so they can do this.

(Sanjana)

In some instances, parents' self-identification as uneducated also seemed to play a role in shaping their hesitation to share their views of different education market providers in interviews, as exemplified in the following exchange:

[RA: Do you see any difference between private and government schools?]

I am not educated, so I am not aware of these things

[RA: Or you cannot tell?]

Those people who are educated would know these things. Those who are not educated will focus on educating their children.

(Pranav, father of one son (age 7); private-aided school)^{vii}

Self-identifying as 'not educated' was a common initial response from many parents to questions asking for their opinions on issues related to school quality. However, the majority of parents did then go on to express more detailed views as the interviews continued, indicating a lack of confidence rather than an absence of opinion, even when quality judgements were relatively rudimentary. This illuminates how parents' characterization of themselves, in this case as 'uneducated', had the potential to impact upon their relationship with school providers and to limit their ability to adopt customer behaviours within education market spaces, whilst at the same time driving their strong focus on their children's education and often associated financial investment.

For other parents who had attended school, the choice of private schooling for their children was connected to their own negative experiences with government schooling:

[RA: Why and how have you come to feel that the level of education in government schools is so low?]

That's because we ourselves have studied in government schools. We exactly know what happens there. Teachers come to schools, they gossip around, someone is knitting a sweater, someone...You must know it all [by now]. No-one is concerned about kids' education, whether they are studying or not, no-one bothers with that.

(Rakesh, uncle of three children (age 11 -15); private schools)

For Rakesh, as for a number of other parents, 'good schooling' was synonymous with private schooling at least in part on the basis of personal experiences with government schooling. Here we see very directly the impact of past failures regarding school quality influencing schooling decisions for the next generation.

However, for parents who had attended government schools, quality perceptions and the choice of private schooling were also informed heavily by the associations between private schooling and social status that was evident in some parents' comments around 'wanting something better' for their children:

I have a dream that while I have studied in a government school, my children should go to a private school like other children.

(Aarav, father of two children (age 3 and 6); private school)

Given that a large proportion of children in the area where Aarav and his family lived were attending government schools, there is an aspirational implication in Aarav's reference to wanting his children to attend private school 'like other children'. The connections between private schooling and social status are developed further in the next section of the paper.

Social status and private schooling

In addition to perceptions of school quality based upon past personal experience, interviews with parents revealed a perceived connection between private schooling and social status. Aside from comments linking private schooling to economic status ('Well, good for those

that can afford it!’ was a comment from one mother), this association was reflected in broad generalisations regarding the behaviour of students at both government and private schools:

Children are taught manners in private schools whereas in government schools, teachers give them work to do and some options and then get busy among themselves.

[RA: What do you mean by manners?]

Like, they are taught to behave in front of others.

(Ridika, mother of one son (age 5); private school)

He [her son] is too young and children are known to get into fights in government schools.

(Sunita, mother of three children (age 1-7); private school)

Here, as in many of the comments surrounding private and government schooling, a contrast is drawn between the children who occupy different school spaces. In particular, whilst a perception of poor quality teaching and supervision within government schools is also implied, it was notable that comments concerning government school quality tended to centre around the children who attended such schools and reflected a preoccupation with conceptions of discipline related to self-presentation and cleanliness:

Those government schools which are till Class V [municipal government primary schools] aren’t very good. I mean, children go there for the heck of it; they don’t learn anything and they are also not clean. In private school, they teach them everything, like how to wear their uniform properly; they even have to iron their dress in a proper manner. But these things are not taught in a government school.

(Nimi, mother of three (age 1 - 7); private school)

The children complained about the atmosphere of that school. The other boys there were dirty and they didn’t like it. They only stayed for two days, within two days we realized that it was not good so we went to [private school].

(Kayaan, two sons (age 15 and 12); private-aided school)

These comments from parents that characterise government school children as poorly dressed and dirty reflect a broader preoccupation with cleanliness that was evident within the

interview data, which may be connected to caste-based rules concerning religious purity (Sriprakash, 2012). Thus, whilst parents generally avoided direct caste and class based language to characterise government school children, discourse surrounding discipline and cleanliness should be understood as carrying social significance beyond a concern with basic hygiene. However, the connection between schooling, caste and social status was also made explicit by parents in some instances, as in the following example:

[RA: Have you seen any difference in education in all these years?]

Government schools are doing better than before and of course there are many new private schools [...] Even poor children can study now. They are given food, lunch.

[RA: Have you ever seen what kind of food they are given?]

Yes, but our children don't eat that kind of food [...] By the way, our children take their food from home.

(Sunita)

The preparation and sharing of food is significant because of caste rules concerning religious ritual purity, with Appadurai (1981) noting how food consumption practices act as 'the semiotic instrument of Hindu ideas of rank and distance' (p. 497). The provision of free midday meals in government schools would seem in this instance to function as a social indicator, with Sunita's rejection of it unequivocal in the separation between their household and others within the community. The choice of private schooling by some parents was thus in some instances both a symbolic and a literal delineation between their own family and others within the local community, with private schooling in practice functioning as a strategy of differentiation on the basis of social status.

In the next section of this paper, I build on this concept of schooling as a social indicator in order to support an explanation of schooling decisions that work to structure social relationships at the community level, part of which may be understood as a process of

‘forging solidarities’, a term I use to convey the deliberate course of action taken by parents to build and to maintain connections with other households.

Forging solidarities

[Solidarity] is about the sense of connection, a matter of feeling and meaning [...] The affective and moral meaning of ‘us’ – what might be called ‘we-ness’ – is a fundamentally structuring social force. The other side of we-ness, equally potent, is difference: who are they, and why are they here?

(Alexander, 2013)

In order to illustrate forging solidarities in action, this section focuses largely on a sub-community in Location B, which was home to many families who identified as having migrated from Tamil Nadu. Despite this particular area of the community being one of the most visibly low income, it was found that many families were choosing to send their children to a private-aided school offering instruction in Tamil, located at some distance from the community and necessitating additional expense in both school fees and transport costs.

The findings suggest that the emphasis placed on Tamil schooling was connected to feelings of belonging, pride in regional identity and resistance to unilateral assimilation. This was most evident when parents were asked their reasons for choosing this particular school for their children:

No, no other schools were on my mind because I only wanted to send them to a Tamil language school.

[RA: When did you come to know that there is this [Tamil medium school] here?]

We always know this. It is [location]

[RA: Are there other schools in this area about which you did not know? Did you ask your neighbour or...?]

Actually that is the only point, that it is a Tamil school.

(Ravi, father of three children (age 1-8); private-aided school)

They teach Tamil there; it is a Tamil school. She has to learn Tamil for her marriage, so it is important for her to know Tamil.

(Latcha, mother of two children (age 10 and 14); private-aided school)

This emphasis placed on Tamil medium schooling by parents, many of whom were second generation migrants to Delhi, was indicative of a (re)forging of solidarities on the basis of regional identity both for themselves and for the next generation, as seen in the assumption that Latcha's daughter will go to Tamil Nadu for her marriage. In this way, schooling seemed to be performing an important function of community socialisation and the maintenance of familial connections by migrant families, with some parents emphasising the importance of children learning Tamil to support the continued connections between households and their extended families:

[RA: Why is it important to learn Tamil?]

Well, what if my young child, suppose her grandfather comes to visit her from Tamil Nadu? She must be able to speak to him, she must be able to understand him, they must be able to talk. So it is very important for her to learn Tamil

(Vikram, father of one daughter (age 5); private-aided school)

Whilst the Tamil medium school was by far the most popular choice within this particular community, there were four examples of parents interviewed from this community 'going against the grain' and not selecting this school. In two instances this decision was attributed to affordability, whilst for the other two households the driving factor was identified as school quality:

[RA: What about the [Tamil medium] school? A lot of people in this area are sending their children there]

The [Tamil medium] school? No, not [that school]. The past generation studied there, the older people in the community, everyone studied there. But now there are better options.

(Sanjana)

For Sanjana, in addition to the better quality education that she felt was on offer at the private school that her son attended, the association of the Tamil school with the ‘past generation’ of the community suggests that the school was, in her view, an ‘old-fashioned’ choice. Whilst the evidence here is limited, the role of schooling in processes of socialisation is particularly pertinent for migrant families where schooling choices may either be used to maintain existing connections or be used to forge new solidarities in processes of community assimilation.

Across the other study sites, a similar trend of school selection in solidarity with other households could be identified amongst other migrant families from Nepal and Rajasthan, and on the basis of religious affiliation. In all cases, social identity factors were found to play a role in identifying trusted voices for school information, as well as shaping what were seen as suitable schooling options. For example, one father, Sadiq, said that he has chosen to send his child to a private school in the local vicinity on the basis that other households in the area were already accessing this particular school:

[RA: Why did you choose this particular school? Did you visit it beforehand and did you talk to people about the school?]

Actually, a lot of children from the colony go to this school and also those from the family. So this is the only thing I thought of and nothing else.

(Sadiq, father of one son (age 8); private school)

Sadiq’s choice of this particular school could be interpreted as an example of consumer herding behaviour, whereby consumers follow the crowd because of a belief that others are better informed (Baddeley, 2010). However, the significance of this choice of school in terms of social identity became explicit in Sadiq’s discussion of the popularity of private schooling amongst Muslim families in the area and the discrimination that he felt that Muslim children had experienced at local government schools:

The government schools here have all facilities but those children [Muslim children] do not get anything; they are not treated well.

[RA: Can you give us some examples why you felt...?]

We eat meat in our home and when the child goes to school, often we pack meat in their lunches. But school authorities do not like meat to be sent to school, so we started giving them eggs. But they are even made to throw away the eggs [...] All non-vegetarian food is thrown away. Children are scolded and often beaten for carrying non-vegetarian food. These schools are not madrasas; they are neither temples nor churches. Still teachers behave like this.

(Sadiq)

A perception, real or actual, of discrimination based on religious identity within certain schools in the area, in this case government schools as a broad category, was thus significant to Sadiq's decision to send his son to a private school, despite a general appreciation for school facilities and programmes designed to support Muslim children's access to school, such as scholarships, free school uniform and books. Thus, what could be interpreted as a following-the-crowd decision ('a lot of children from this colony go to this school') may also be understood as both an expression of solidarity with other households and a strategic avoidance of schools where children of minority religious backgrounds such as Sadiq's may experience discrimination. In this way, schooling choices play a role in illuminating dissensions within the social context of the local community.

School-level data also illuminated the attentiveness of schools to social identity in shaping their brand identities. In this way, in addition to the Tamil medium school, whose ethos and brand were informed heavily by regional and linguistic associations, other schools were found to have adopted various tactics in order establish a clear market identity and brand community. In some private schools which sought to establish a clear religious identity this included offering Urdu and Punjabi language classes for Muslim and Sikh pupils

respectively, as well as utilising clear visual identifiers of religious affiliation, such as the use of the *Khanda*^{viii} on school signs. One private school in Location B accessed by some study participants was also found to offer a parallel curriculum for Afghan migrant students, at an additional cost, which school authorities interpreted as an effort to cater to the growth of the Afghan community in a nearby area in recent years. This apparent attempt to establish a ‘niche’ within the wider school market through the use of various aspects of social identity within school branding strategies and the role of social identity in shaping parents’ choices illustrate the significance of identity to choice-making, as well as the impact of increased marketization on the nature of the education landscape.

Conclusion

The research findings presented in this paper suggest that interpretivist consumption research can provide useful insights into the school choice process in a number of ways. In particular, a focus on the relationship between consumption and identity construction allows for an analysis that is attentive to the social meanings that particular consumption objects may carry. Building on earlier work that has a socio-cultural orientation, but that has not yet been applied to the Global South, this paper has sought to refocus attention on the salience of parental identity for understanding schooling choices that are at present overlooked by the rational choice approach which underpins dominant policy discourses. The findings suggest that closer study is needed of the changing construction of parenting and familial dynamics within contemporary Indian society in order to illuminate the impact of education and other social policy reforms on lived experiences of market settings, and children’s lives more generally.

Furthermore, in contrast to the findings that may be generated through the application of a rational choice approach, the analysis provides insights as to the social meanings behind

particular schooling choices. The connections between private schooling and social status evident in the data, for example, suggest that this is a contributory factor in the widespread discourse of derision surrounding government schooling. Without other efforts for systemic quality improvement as well as efforts to mitigate the effects of relatively privileged households exiting the government sector, pro-market approaches have the potential to entrench rather than to disrupt the reproduction of social inequalities through education. This interpretation is further supported by the findings that illuminate how parents' own educational biographies and self-identities may constrain their ability to act as 'customers' in education market spaces.

At the same time, the concept of forging solidarities offers an alternative way of understanding school enrolment decisions that recognizes the social significance of such choices for the wider family unit. This illuminates both the strategic nature of schooling choices for some households and that parents do not always behave as consumers in education market spaces in the ways that policymakers may predict. Hence the findings imply the need for a more holistic conception of school quality that incorporates the symbolic nature of the school choice decision for households. The importance for policymakers of understanding parental priorities with regard to their children's education in order to best align policy action with broader societal goals for social equity is equally apparent.

In addition, as the educational landscape in many countries is increasingly conceptualized as a market space where choice is both necessitated and measures of school quality are reduced to quantifiable components, attention to parental identity within choice processes illuminates the nature of school choice as a deeply *personal* act rather than the *impersonal* tool for quality improvement that education policy discourse frequently implies. Whilst the study focuses on a specific location and social context, the findings generate insights that are of broader relevance to studies of school choice, and suggest that the

relationship between parental identity construction and schooling decisions is an area worthy of further inquiry.

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ⁱ School in India runs from Class I to Class XII (age 6-18). Elementary level schooling comprises lower primary (Class I to Class V; age 6-11) and upper primary (Class VI to Class VIII; age 12-14).

ⁱⁱ Jhuggi Jhopri is a term for a small, self-constructed dwelling.

ⁱⁱⁱ Other languages spoken by interviewees during interviews were Bhojpuri, English and Tamil.

^{iv} Schools that are privately managed but receive government funding for specific expenses such as teacher salaries (Goyal & Pandey 2009).

^v All names used throughout are pseudonyms.

^{vi} All interview data presented in this paper has been translated from the original Hindi (or other mother tongue language) into English.

^{vii} This particular private-aided school, a Tamil medium school, is discussed further in the section of the paper entitled 'Forging Solidarities'.

^{viii} The emblem of Sikhism. The Khanda consists of a solid circle, two interlocking swords and a double edged sword running through the centre of the circle.